

Message Text

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UNCLAS SECTION 1 OF 3 TOKYO 3876

BRUSSELS FOR USEC

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SUBJECT: JAPAN'S TWO PERCENT UNEMPLOYMENT: A PROBLEM?

1. SUMMARY: JAPANESE CONVINCED THAT CURRENT OFFICIAL
2.05 PCT UNEMPLOYMENT FIGURE UNDERSTATES SEVERITY OF
EMPLOYMENT PROBLEM JAPAN IS FACING AS RECESSION DEEPENS
AND JAPANESE INTERNATIONAL MARKETS IN STEEL, SHIPPING,
TEXTILE AND OTHER KEY INDUSTRIES BECOME MORE RESTRICTED.
DESPITE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN, JAPANESE EMPLOYERS' ALLEGIANCE
TO SO-CALLED LIFETIME EMPLOYMENT SYSTEM HAS MEANT CON-
TINUED EMPLOYMENT FOR GROWING NUMBER OF SURPLUS WORKERS
WHO WOULD BE LAID OFF OR FIRED IN US UNDER SIMILAR
BUSINESS CONDITIONS. GOJ-FUNDED EMPLOYMENT STABILIZATION
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SYSTEM, ENACTED IN 1974, HAS REINFORCED THIS TRADITIONAL
TABOO AGAINST LAYOFFS BY COVERING PART OF COMPANY COSTS
FOR WORKERS REMOVED FROM PRODUCTION LINES BUT KEPT
ON COMPANY PAYROLL. ESTIMATES OF NUMBER OF SURPLUS
WORKERS VARY FROM 600,000 TO 2.5 MILLION, BUT MOST EXPERTS
HERE BELIEVE THAT IN ABSENCE OF SPECIAL JAPANESE EMPLOY-
MENT PRACTICES AND GOJ POLICIES, UNEMPLOYMENT FIGURE

WOULD AT LEAST DOUBLE. WHILE FEW EXPECT OFFICIAL UNEMPLOYMENT RATE TO RISE ABOVE 2.5 PCT THIS YEAR, JAPAN'S EFFORT TO KEEP WORKERS ON PAYROLLS AND OFF UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF ROLLS, AS RECESSION CONTINUES, WILL POSE INCREASINGLY HEAVY BURDEN ON BUSINESS OVERHEAD AND ON GOJ BUDGET. END SUMMARY.

2. FOR LAST 6 MONTHS, PARTICULARLY SINCE TRADE PROBLEMS HAVE BECOME MORE INTENSE, GOJ, LABOR UNIONS AND EMPLOYER GROUPS HAVE ALL BEEN STRESSING THAT JAPAN, IN SPITE OF STRIKINGLY LOW OFFICIAL 2 PCT UNEMPLOYMENT FIGURE, HAS SERIOUS EMPLOYMENT PROBLEM WHICH WILL WORSEN OVER SHORT-TERM.

3. UNEMPLOYMENT FIGURES THEMSELVES ARE NO CAUSE FOR SATISFACTION HERE, AND RECENT PRIME MINISTER OFFICE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT JANUARY 1978 UNEMPLOYMENT REACHED 1.26 MILLION, PRODUCING NEW-SEASONALLY ADJUSTED RATE OF 2.05 PCT, HAS ONLY REINFORCED CONCERN. WHILE TOTAL NUMBER OF EMPLOYED ACTUALLY ROSE 510,000 OVER FIGURE FOR JANUARY 1977, TO 51.9 MILLION, AND WHILE NEW UNEMPLOYMENT FIGURE WAS 10,000 BELOW THAT OF A YEAR AGO, GOJ SPOKESMEN HAVE EMPHASIZED FACT THAT JANUARY WAS THIRTEENTH STRAIGHT MONTH OF OVER 2 PCT UNEMPLOYMENT, LONGEST SUCH PERIOD SINCE END OF WAR. MOREOVER, PROSPECTS FOR FEBRUARY AND MARCH EVEN GLOOMIER DUE TO SEASONAL FACTORS, SUCH AS ANNUAL WAGE NEGOTIATIONS IN EARLY SPRING AND EXPECTED RISE OF BANKRUPTCIES AS BANK LOAN REPAYMENTS FALL DUE. UNEMPLOY-
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MENT HAS TRADITIONALLY PEAKED IN MARCH AND GOJ OFFICIALS PREDICTED LAST FALL THAT BY END OF SPRING UNEMPLOYMENT WOULD RISE TO BETWEEN 1.4 AND 1.5 MILLION. IN RECENT STATEMENTS BEFORE DIET, BOTH MOL AND CPA HAVE REVISED THESE ESTIMATED DOWNWARD, BUT LABMIN FUJII TOLD DIET FEBRUARY 15 THAT AVERAGE UNEMPLOYMENT FOR JANUARY - MARCH 1978 WOULD STILL BE AT LEAST 1.3 MILLION.

4. SINCE NEITHER CURRENT NOR PROJECTED OFFICIAL UNEMPLOYMENT FIGURE EVEN REACHES STANDARD US "FULL EMPLOYMENT" LEVEL (3.5 - 4 PCT), JAPANESE CONCERN MAY STRIKE AMERICAN OBSERVERS AS GROSS OVERREACTION. HOWEVER, EVEN THOUGH US AND JAPANESE UNEMPLOYMENT STATISTICS CALCULATION METHODS DIFFER ONLY SLIGHTLY (FOR EXAMPLE, JAPAN INCLUDES 15 YEAR OLDS IN SURVEY, WHILE US BEGINS WITH 16 YEAR OLDS), IT CAN BE ARGUED THAT JAPANESE STATISTICS ARE NOT ADEQUATE MEASURE OF JOB MARKET. IN JAPAN, INDUSTRIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL CUSTOM TREAT WORKERS AS FIXED RATHER THAN VARIABLE COST OF PRODUCTION, SO THAT JAPANESE EMPLOYMENT LEVELS HAVE NOT BEEN AFFECTED AS STRONGLY BY FLUCTUATIONS IN DEMAND FOR LABOR AS IN US. GOJ AND PRIVATE SURVEYS OF INDUSTRY HAVE ESTIMATED NUMBER OF SURPLUS WORKERS

AT ANYWHERE BETWEEN 600,000 AND 2 MILLION. ONE SURVEY
EVEN SETS LEVEL AT 2.4 MILLION, LAYOFF OF WHICH WOULD
BOOST JAPANESE UNEMPLOYMENT TO APPROXIMATELY 6.5 PCT. MUCH
QUOTED PREDICTION BY MINISTRY OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND
INDUSTRY CLAIMED THAT AT END OF CURRENT FISCAL YEAR,
EMPLOYMENT IN TEN INDUSTRIES SUFFERING LONG-TERM DECLINE
(COTTON MILLS, SHIPBUILDING, ETC.) WOULD DROP BY 34,000.

5. MOST JAPANESE EMPLOYERS VIEW LAYOFFS AS DESPERATE,
LAST-RESORT MEANS OF DEALING WITH PROBLEM OF SURPLUS
WORK FORCE WHEN POOR BUSINESS CONDITIONS FINALLY FORCE
LABOR COST REDUCTIONS. THEREFORE, SEVERAL MEASURES HAVE
BEEN ADOPTED TO AVOID ACTUALLY DISCHARGING EMPLOYEES:
REDUCTION OF TEMPORARY EMPLOYEES (IN SOME INDUSTRIES, SUCH AS
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STEEL, SUCH LABORERS ACCOUNTED FOR NEARLY 50 PCT OF SHOP
FLOOR WORK FORCE PRIOR TO CURRENT RECESSION); ATTRITION,
INCLUDING ENCOURAGING EARLY RETIREMENT THROUGH INCREASED
RETIREMENT BONUSES; AND DISPATCHING SURPLUS REGULAR WORKERS
TO OTHER FIRMS WITHIN SAME INDUSTRIAL GROUP WHICH
REMAIN AT FULL PRODUCTION LEVEL. JAPANESE FIRMS HAVE
ALSO TAKEN FIRST STEPS TOWARD REVISING "NENKO JORETSU"

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OR SENIORITY WAGE SYSTEM, UNDER WHICH REGULAR EMPLOYEES' SALARIES HAVE BEEN BASED PRIMARILY ON LENGTH OF SERVICE. AS AVERAGE AGE OF WORK FORCE HAS RISEN SHARPLY IN LAST DECADE, THIS SYSTEM HAS BEEN IMPORTANT CAUSE OF SPRALLING LABOR COSTS.

6. AS RESULT OF THESE MEASURES, RECESSION-HIT OR DECLINING INDUSTRIES HAVE BEEN ABLE TO REDUCE WORK FORCE FAIRLY SUBSTANTIALLY OVER PAST FEW YEARS WITHOUT ACTUALLY LAYING OFF OR FIRING REGULAR WORKERS. ACCORDING TO MOL, MANY NON-REGULAR WORKERS - PART-TIME, CONTRACTED FROM OTHER FIRMS, DAY LABORERS - WHO HAVE LOST JOBS IN MANUFACTURING HAVE BECOME DISCOURAGED BY POOR JOB MARKET (TWO APPLICANTS FOR EVERY JOB DURING LAST FEW MONTHS IN MONTHLY GOJ SURVEY) AND HAVE WITHDRAWN FROM WORK FORCE. THIS TREND UNCLASSIFIED

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HAS BEEN PARTICULARLY NOTICABLE AMONG WOMEN OF WORKING AGE, WHO, ACCORDING TO INFORMAL MOL SURVEY, HAVE SWELLED NON-LABOR FORCE POPULATION OVER LAST FOUR YEARS. HOWEVER, OVERALL EMPLOYMENT CONTINUES TO RISE, INDICATING THAT FOR MANY NON-PERMANENT WORKERS AND FOR NEW LABOR FORCE ENTRANTS, DECLINE OF EMPLOYMENT IN MANUFACTURING SECTOR HAS SO FAR BEEN COMPENSATED BY CONTINUED GROWTH AND JOB CREATION IN THE TERTIARY SECTOR. THUS, OF 510,000 NET JOBS CREATED IN PRIVATE SECTOR IN 1977, 220,000 BELONGED TO SERVICE AND 310,000 TO FINANCE AND SALES, WHILE MANUFACTURING LOST 40.00 MANUFACTURING EMPLOYMENT LOSSES HAVE BEEN CONCENTRATED IN PARTICULAR INDUSTRIES SUCH AS STEEL (2.8 PERCENT DROP IN EMPLOYMENT FROM OCTOBER 1976 TO OCTOBER 1977), TEXTILES (9.0 PERCENT DROP IN SAME PERIOD, CHEMICALS (3.3 PERCENT DROP), FURNITURE (4.3 PERCENT DROP) AND MACHINERY (2.8 PERCENT DROP).

7. HOWEVER, EVEN GUARANTEED LIFE-LONG EMPLOYMENT FOR THE REGULAR WORKER HAS ITS LIMIT - BANKRUPTCY OF THE FIRM. AS BUSINESS FAILURES GROW IN NUMBER (OVER 18,400 IN 1977 COMPARED WITH 15,600 IN 1976), MANY FIRMS HAVE BEEN FACING PRESSURE FROM MAJOR CREDITORS TO REDUCE LABOR COSTS. IN ABSENCE OF GOJ'S NOVEL "EMPLOYMENT STABILIZATION" PROGRAM, WHICH SUBSIDIZES FIRMS KEEPING SURPLUS WORKERS ON PAYROLL, LABOR CUT-BACKS MIGHT HAVE BEEN EVEN GREATER. CURRENT LARGE SCALE EFFORT TO STABILIZE

EMPLOYMENT INITIATED WITH REFORM OF UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE SYSTEM IN LATE 1974. NEW LAW, EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE ACT OF 1974, WAS DESIGNED TO ASSIST INDUSTRIES ESPECIALLY AFFECTED BY 1973 OIL SHOCK. IN ADDITION TO EXPANDING TRADITIONAL UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS (HENCEFORTH CALLED EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE), NEW LAW ALSO SET UP EMPLOYMENT ADJUSTMENT SUBSIDY SYSTEM, WHICH AUTHORIZED GOJ TO UTILIZE UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE FUNDS TO COVER, UP TO MAXIMUM UNCLASSIFIED

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OF 75 DAYS, ONE HALF (IN CASE OF LARGE FIRMS) OR 2/3 (IN CASE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZE FIRMS) OF ALLOWANCES COMPANIES PAID WORKERS THEY PLACED IN "PAID LEAVE" OR "FURLOUGHED" STATUS AS RESULT OF "SHIFTS IN INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC SITUATION." GOJ DESIGNATED EIGHT INDUSTRIES INCLUDING TEXTILES, ELECTRICAL APPLIANCES AND NON-FERROUS METALS, AS ELIGIBLE TO RECEIVE SUBSIDIES UNDER THIS PROGRAM. DURING ITS FIRST YEAR OF OPERATION IN JAPANESE FISCAL YEAR 1975, EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE SUBSIDIZED FURLOUGHS (USUALLY BRIEF) FOR 2.8 MILLION WORKERS AT 59,000 COMPANIES AT COST OF 55 BILLION YEN (\$230 MILLION YEN240-\$1). HOWEVER WHEN PACE OF ECONOMIC RECOVERY INCREASED IN JFY 76, APPLICATIONS FOR THIS SUBSIDY DECLINED SUBSTANTIALLY.

8. IN EARLY 1977, WITH RECOVERY SLOWING, GOJ INTRODUCED STILL ANOTHER PROGRAM DESIGNED TO KEEP WORKERS OFF UNEMPLOYMENT ROLLS. EMPLOYMENT STABILIZATION FUND, ENACTED IN SPRING OF 1977 AND INITIATED LAST OCTOBER, EXPANDED SYSTEM OF PAYROLL SUBSIDIES TEMPORARILY FURLOUGHING WORKERS DUE TO "BUSINESS FLUCTUATIONS;" RETRAINING WORKERS TO ENTER NEW LINES OF PRODUCTION IN SAME FIRM; OR TRANSFERRING WORKERS TEMPORARILY TO WORK FOR OTHER COMPANIES. AN ADDITIONAL SUBSIDY OF YEN11,000 (\$45 \$1-YEN240) PER MONTH FOR ONE YEAR WAS TO BE PAID EMPLOYERS FOR EACH WORKER BETWEEN AGES OF 55 AND 65 HIRED IN ORDER TO PROMOTE EMPLOYMENT AMONG AGE GROUP WITH HIGHEST UNEMPLOYMENT RATE OF ANY AGE GROUP. TO MEET ADDITIONAL COSTS, EMPLOYERS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE SYSTEM WERE INCREASED FROM .8 PERCENT TO .85 PERCENT OF EMPLOYEES' WAGES. NEW PROGRAM COVERAGE EXTENDED TO 79 INDUSTRIES (INCLUDING MINING, CHEMICALS, COTTON SPINNING, STEEL, GARMENT WORKERS, SHIPBUILDING, ETC.).

9. TOTAL BUDGET FOR SUBSIDY PROGRAMS IN JFY78 WILL BE 1.06 (\$4.5 BILLION \$1-240) TRILLION YEN (AS PASSED TO .869 TRILLION YEN IN JFY77), THEREBY PROVIDING 18 MILLION MAN DAYS UNCLASSIFIED

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OF SUBSIDY OVER NEXT 12 MONTHS. IF SUBSIDIZED MAN DAYS WERE
EVENLY" DISTRIBUTED THROUGHOUT FISCAL YEAR, BENEFITS WOULD
ONLY COVER AVERAGE OF 40,000 WORKERS SO THAT ON STRICTLY
STATISTICAL BASIS, PROGRAM IS PREVENTING RISE OF ONLY .032 PERCENT
IN CURRENT UNEMPLOYMENT RATE. HOWEVER, SUBSIDY OF VALUE
IN PREVENTING COLLAPSE OF SOME SMALLER AND MEDIUM-SIZED
FIRMS (WITH THEIR ENTIRE WORK FORCE ADDED TO RANKS OF
UNEMPLOYED) AND AS SYMBOL OF GOJ DETERMINATION TO MAINTAIN

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CURRENT EMPLOYMENT LEVEL, AND POSSIBILITY HAS ENCOURAGED
LARGER ENTERPRISES TO KEEP REDUNDANT WORKERS ON PAYROLLS
EVEN WITHOUT GOVERNMENT SUBSIDY.

10. EXPERTS HERE GENERALLY AGREE THAT, AS RESULT OF THESE PRIVATE
SECTOR AND GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT POLICIES, OFFICIAL
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE WILL STILL NOT RISE ABOVE 2.5 PCT, EVEN
THOUGH 1978 MOST LIKELY WILL BE WORST YEAR FOR UNEMPLOYMENT SINCE
IMMEDIATE POST-WORLD WAR II DEPRESSION. MOREOVER,
PROJECTIONS BY MOL, NIKKEIREN, AND JAPAN ECONOMIC RESEARCH
COUNCIL INDICATE THAT EVEN IF NAR 2 PCT UNEMPLOYMENT CONTINUES
FOR TWO MORE YEARS, PREDICTED ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN 1980
WILL REDUCE RATE TO BETWEEN 1.3 PCT (WHICH GOJ PREVIOUSLY

REGARDED AS FRICTIONAL UNEMPLOYMENT RATE) AND 1.7 PCT. HOWEVER, PENDING ECONOMIC UPSWING, JAPANESE INDUSTRIES, PARTICULARLY THOSE ENTERING PERIOD OF LONG-TERM DECLINE IN INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS, WILL BE UNDER INCREASING FINANCIAL PRESSURE. THEY MUST ATTEMPT TO RESTRUCTURE AND RATIONALIZE PRODUCTION

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WITHOUT VIOLATING COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH REGULAR WORKERS (AND THEIR UNIONS), WHICH WAS A VITAL FACTOR CONTRIBUTING TO JAPANESE INDUSTRIAL GROWTH DURING LAST DECADE. AT SAME TIME, GOJ WILL HAVE TO BEAR GROWING COSTS OF EMPLOYMENT STABILIZATION MEASURES, AND IF UNEMPLOYMENT AND BANKRUPTCY FIGURES RISE AS EXPECTED THIS YEAR, POLITICAL PRESSURE FOR ADDITIONAL SUBSIDIES MAY MOUNT FURTHER.

11. CONCLUSION: WE BELIEVE GOJ AND MEDIA ATTENTION TO EMPLOYMENT PROBLEM, WHICH HAS INCREASED DRAMATICALLY IN RECENT MONTHS, RESULT NOT ONLY OF PROLONGED RECESSION, BUT ALSO OF INCREASING SENSITIVITY HERE TO CRITICISM FROM MAJOR TRADING PARTNERS THAT JAPAN HAS BEEN EXPORTING HER UNEMPLOYMENT. IN ADDITION, FEAR OF RISING UNEMPLOYMENT HAS BEEN USED BY VARIOUS GOJ MINISTRIES TO JUSTIFY APPROPRIATIONS FOR NEW PROGRAMS AND BY MANAGEMENT IN PRIVATE INDUSTRY TO LIMIT UNION DEMANDS IN ANNUAL WAGE NEGOTIATIONS. DISPLAY OF ANXIETY HAS HELPED CREATE PUBLIC IMPRESSION HERE THAT JAPANESE EMPLOYMENT PROBLEMS MAY BE AS SEVERE AS THOSE IN US.

12. WHILE WE DO NOT BELIEVE JAPANESE PROBLEM IS, OR WILL BE, AS SERIOUS AS THAT IN US, WE DO BELIEVE THAT INDUSTRY AND GOJ POLICY OF KEEPING SURPLUS WORKERS ON COMPANY PAYROLLS AND, TO EXTENT POSSIBLE, OFF OF UNEMPLOYMENT ROLLS, HAS PREVENTED RISE OF UNEMPLOYMENT AND ACCOMPANYING SOCIAL PROBLEMS WHICH HAVE CHARACTERIZED RECESSION IN OTHER OECD NATIONS. WE ALSO BELIEVE THAT WITHOUT THESE INNOVATIVE EMPLOYMENT POLICIES, JAPANESE UNEMPLOYMENT WOULD PROBABLY DOUBLE. AS IT IS, JAPAN'S HIDDEN UNEMPLOYMENT HAS PLACED GROWING FINANCIAL BURDEN ON PRIVATE FIRMS AND ON GOJ BUDGET. THUS, EVEN THOUGH OFFICIAL UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IS UNLIKELY TO RISE ABOVE 2.5 PCT FOR FORESEEABLE FUTURE, JAPAN

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IS FACING MORE SERIOUS EMPLOYMENT PROBLEM THAN IS INDICATED BY OFFICIAL STATISTICS.

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